# A BUTTERFLY IN THE GHETTO
# March 11, 2001

# FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
# John M. Buchanan

**"The biblical prophets challenged the way things were while at the same time helping people imagine new possibilities. They were not afraid to confront the king, to defend the poor, or to say that what God had in mind was far different from what most people had settled for. Rankled by injustice, sickened by violence, and outraged by oppression, the prophets defined true religion as doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with your God.... God is in this with us. God is not distant and far away and somehow in charge of making things turn out right. God is enmeshed with us in the human situation: 'God with us' – Emmanuel – the heart of Christian faith is incarnation. In Jesus, God hits the streets."**

**Jim Wallis**
***The Second Reformation Has Begun***
***Envisioning the New City***

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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# A BUTTERFLY IN THE GHETTO
**March 11, 2001**

**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Zechariah 8: 1-6**
**Luke 13: 31-35**

**"Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood." Luke 13:34 (NRSV)**

***In the midst of darkness, O God, you come as light. In the midst of despair, you bring encouragement. Even in death you give life. So now, in the silence of this time together, speak your word to us. Startle us with your truth and the relentless hopefulness of your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

**The Fourth Presbyterian Church is located in one of the most privileged urban neighborhoods in the world. But if you leave Fourth Church and drive west on Chicago Avenue and pick up Ogden and angle, with the loop to your left, to Washington Boulevard, and continue directly west, you will come to the United Center and if you continue past United Center and drive three more miles or so, you will see an urban environment very different from Michigan Avenue. You will not like what you see. You will have to remind yourself that this is the United States of America in the year of our Lord 2001, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, whose political attention is currently focused on how to use its unprecedented budget surplus. Driving west a few miles on Washington Boulevard, you will have to remind yourself where you are: that you are not in a third world country.**

**On the corner of the 4300 block of Washington Boulevard, you will see a huge, beautiful old church building, the New Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church. Inside, if you look up into the gorgeously ornate dome, you will see pictures of saints and popes and archbishops. On the side walls you will see carved in stone, the fourteen Stations of the Cross and you will realize that New Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church was once a Roman Catholic Church. When your eyes move to the front of the church where risers for the choir and a central pulpit stand where the high altar used to be, you will be startled by two huge posters flanking the chancel. They are pictures of children, a boy and a girl, about four years old, beautiful African American children.**

**The message on the posters will jar you. One says, "I want to live," which apparently is not a given for a child living on the west side of Chicago. The other says, "Don't shoot. I want to grow up."**

**I made the drive to the New Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church because I am a member of the Religious Leadership Task Force of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention. Violence**

**prevention is an urgent priority for the people who live on West Washington Boulevard. Unemployment, drugs and gunfire make it a unique American neighborhood. I met a wonderful eighteen year old, Germain Jones, who, by mid-adolescence had joined a gang, committed crimes, dealt and used drugs, shot people, done time and was out on parole. "My church saved me," Germaine said. "My pastor wouldn't let me go. It's tough, but Christ is with me,"**

**As I drove back to Fourth Church, I kept thinking of the text I would be preaching on in a few weeks, on the second Sunday of Lent: Jesus' lament over Jerusalem:**

> **"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing."**

**Midway through the story of Jesus, as related in the gospels, there is a shift in attention and focus from Galilee to Jerusalem, from small villages, lakes, and open spaces, to a big city.**

**In the text today, a group of Pharisees warn him that Herod, the King, is planning to kill him. Herod's actually not much of a king. He's a Tetrarch, which means he rules over about a fourth of the old kingdom. But Rome is the real power. Herod reigns at Rome's pleasure. His job is to keep the peace, to stop rabble-rousers from stirring people up and causing headaches for the Roman administrator, Pontius Pilate. Herod has already shown what he is capable of doing by brutally executing John the Baptist.**

**"Herod wants to kills you," they warn Jesus. But Jesus will not be intimidated nor deterred. He's on his way toward the city—Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.**

**It's difficult not to think about Jerusalem today, so violent, so tragic, so oppressive, still stoning and killing. It had a reputation, even in those days. It killed prophets.**

**Prophets were always in trouble for telling the truth, for siding with the poor and oppressed, for not settling for the status quo—and for asking people to see a new vision of the world, the city, as it could be, as God wants it to be. "Impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem," Jesus says—a prediction that will come tragically true for him.**

**It is an important text, particularly for those of us whose home is a modern day Jerusalem. Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "According to the Bible," there are three chief places where God reveals God's self to us: on mountaintops, in the wilderness, and in the city. The air is thin in the first; there are wild beasts in the second; but the city may be the hardest place of all to recognize the presence and activity of God." ("Looking for God in the City," *Envisioning the New City,* p.183)**

**The problem—the problem I had driving out West Washington, is that the city can be pretty harsh, cruel, unforgiving, ugly and violent.**

**Nowhere is the appalling gap between the rich and the poor more evident than in the city. Jim Wallis, Editor of *Sojourner's Magazine,* lives in a poor section of Washington. There are so many empty, burned out, disintegrating houses that his young son once asked, "Daddy, was there a war here?" Wallis, an Evangelical Christian with a strong sense of the social implications of the Gospel, talks about Burger King Moms. Unlike "Soccer Moms," courted by both political parties in recent elections, no one pays attention to Burger King Moms, urban single mothers, trying to move from welfare to work, who bring their children with them to their place of employment because they have no other alternatives. I witnessed it at Starbucks in Northwestern Hospital. Three young children, maybe 8,6 and 4, sitting at a table with coloring books and crayons, more interested in the sugar packets, their mother racing back and forth from the counter where she was working and where her customers were becoming impatient and surly, to the table to try to supervise her children. If we want poor people to move from welfare to work, we have to do better than this.**

**And drugs and guns, together the cancer that threatens to undo us. We have created a lethal environment for young urban Americans. We have bombarded them with commercial messages from their infancy that tell them their worth as human beings depends on buying and consuming. And we have arranged for a way they can make a lot of money quickly and easily and join the rest of us. We wonder why they don't find part-time jobs at minimum wage and no benefits attractive; why they choose instead to join the one really successful business enterprise in the neighborhood—drugs. Wallis says 10-year-old kids in his neighborhood wear beepers, not because they are little doctors or lawyers or business executives, but because they are runners and spotters and when a drug deal is about to happen, they can make a hundred dollars in a few minutes.**

**If you think that we have the answer to this, that propping up the astronomical cost of cocaine by making it illegal and therefore assuring that it is one of the most profitable items in the market place, and that filling up our jails with drug users—making us the uncontested world leader in the percentage of our population in prison, if you think we are winning the war against drugs, you should probably not see the motion picture *Traffic.* It will make you very uncomfortable. Maybe it will make enough of us angry that we will begin to demand something more of the politicians than the tired old moralistic thinking that has put us in this terrible place. Maybe if enough people get angry we will begin to demand a thorough public conversation about whether addiction is best regarded as a criminal offense or a treatable condition, about whether rehabilitation programs don't work at least as effectively as a very costly penal system that serves to train petty criminals in the art and skill of major crime, a conversation about whether a government-regulated program to control but make available illegal drugs under carefully proscribed conditions, might not have the immediate effect of eliminating profitability and therefore the entire industry of drug importing, shipping, processing, selling, delivering—which in turn produces rampant crime and violence.**

**And guns: if there is anything more dangerous and more foolish than our approach to drug traffic, is it not the easy accessibility of guns to anyone who wants to use one? Not guns for hunting or sport, but guns designed to kill human beings, hand guns, guns small enough to tuck into your backpack and carry to school one day, guns easily obtainable on that adolescent day when you're down and hassled and sick and tired of it all and some buddy tells you you're worthless. 190 million guns are circulating in our country—some 65 million handguns. The President called it an act of "disgraceful cowardice" when a 15 year old in Santee, California, killed two students and wounded 13. But is it not also disgraceful that it was all so easily done, that the fact that he had the gun in his backpack is now a daily occurrence in schools everywhere?**

**Before you leave today, please visit our hallway gallery and look at the pictures drawn by elementary students who live in Cabrini-Green and attend Byrd Academy. The children were asked to express themselves on the subject of violence and I enter their work as supporting evidence for Jesus' lament over the city.**

**Jesus lamented over the city but he was not intimidated or deterred. His people are called to live in the city, to love the city and never to stop trying to claim the city as the habitation of God.**

**Urban scholar, Donna Schaper, calls that being a "Public Church." A Public Church does three things:**

> **--chooses to identify with the suffering around it and if there is no visible suffering, around it, its members will go somewhere near or far and find some to identify with.**
>
> **--learns from the culture, doesn't close its doors and pontificate, but is open and listens.**
>
> **--and intentionally participates in the life of the city.**

**We attempt here to be a faithfully public church in this extraordinary place. It's part of our tradition. I just learned this week that when, 40 years ago, there was a major police scandal in Chicago, Harrison Ray Anderson, Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, appointed a three person committee of lawyers to investigate. They did and they reported to the congregation on Sunday morning during worship.**

**We are a public church and we invite people to join us in this ministry for theological reasons. In Jim Wallis's blunt but wise words, "God is in this with us . . . God with us . . Emmanuel—the heart of the Christian faith is incarnation . . . In Jesus God hits the streets." (*The Second Reformation Has Begun: Envisioning the New City,* p.57)**

**Wallis tells about Mary Glover, a 60-year-old volunteer at Sojourner's Neighborhood Center who helps hand out 300 bags of groceries every week. Before the doors are opened, all those who helped prepare and sort and bag the food join hands and pray. Mary Glover**

**does the praying—prays, Wallis says, like someone who knows what it is to be poor and also prays like she knows to whom she is talking.**

**"She thanks God for the gift of another day. Then she prays, "Lord, we know that you'll be coming through the line today, so help us to treat you well." That's good incarnational theology and that's why we are here and it is why followers of Jesus will be in the city in his name and for his sake.**

**He is there ahead of us. Those old prophets not only condemned injustice and got themselves stoned for scolding the powers that be, they also were "relentless hopers," always seeing a beautiful vision of what, by God's grace and human determination, could be. None, for me, is lovelier than the prophet Zechariah.**

> **"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with a staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts. Even if it seems impossible . . . should it also seem impossible to me? (Zechariah 8: 4-6)**

**The heart of the Gospel, the good news, is that God is with us, that the good and gracious and creative energy of God is with us, always, everywhere, transforming, creating all things new, even in the midst of desperate situations.**

**I was startled recently to see a butterfly in Cabrini. This church is committed to Cabrini-Green, has been in the past and will be in the future. We have a Tutoring Program for the children, a Center for Whole Life, a tennis program, we will continue to be a presence in whatever Cabrini becomes. And we sponsor a cluster of the four elementary schools that serve the neighborhood—an effort to partner with public schools and be a catalyst for school-community cooperation. One of them is Byrd Academy, a Chicago Public School in the middle of the project.**

**Byrd School is not particularly pretty. It has no gym, no assembly hall, no lunchroom. The students play outside weather permitting and eat in the hallways. The church staff visited Byrd Academy a few weeks ago and was shown around by the principal, Joe Gardner—a modern saint. Byrd Academy is a source of hope. Good, caring, committed people teach there. Good, bright youngsters go to school there. Outside, the crumbling high-rises with their wire fences, deteriorating streets, blowing trash, pot holes, fire trucks roaring by followed by ambulance sirens screaming—a collage of hell. But inside—hope—a new vision of what could be by God's grace and human determination.**

**At the end of our tour, Mr. Gardner showed us a wall mural created by Byrd Academy's mentally challenged youngsters. The students had been asked to draw a picture of how the city ought to look. The mural contained signature Chicago landmarks, Hancock and Sears Towers, more trees and grass than the students had ever seen, birds, a computer, naturally,**

**and from side to side a symbol of transformation and hope, a cocoon and a beautiful, large, yellow butterfly, symbol of resurrection, promise of the presence of God's creative, hopeful energy—in the unlikeliest of places.**

**That is the good news.**

**Thanks be to God.**